

2015

President Bergeron's 101st Convocation Address - "Pathways to a Stronger College"

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Recommended Citation

Bergeron, Katherine, "President Bergeron's 101st Convocation Address - "Pathways to a Stronger College"" (2015). *Convocation Addresses*. 24.
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Pathways to a Stronger College
Remarks by President Bergeron
101st Convocation
August 2015

It is wonderful to see so many of you here on this beautiful late summer afternoon and to be able to welcome you all to this very special convocation ceremony. I want to begin by inviting you to extend your warmest greetings to the newest members of the Connecticut College community: the **20** new staff members; the **17** new faculty members and postdoctoral fellows; and the **508** new Connecticut College students, including 3 inspired and inspiring return-to-college students, 24 wise and beautiful transfer students, **and 481** exuberant, talented, and idealistic members of the mighty class of 2019! It is my duty and my honor to declare this new year—the 101st year of academic exercises at Connecticut College—officially open.

This is an important occasion for celebration and reflection. It was exactly one hundred years ago, in the fall of 1915, that we welcomed our very first students to this hill to begin the official history of our college. The faculty, students, and staff present on that day were very much focused on the future, buoyed by the collaborative spirit of their new venture and inspired by its progressive vision of education.

Now, a century later, we are poised at a similarly powerful moment. There are at least three initiatives in the coming year that are designed to propel the College forward. First, we will be launching “Connections,” a bold new venture in integrative liberal education. Second, we will be embarking on a comprehensive strategic planning process — the first one in 10 years — that will identify the goals and priorities that should advance the College in the next decade. And third, we will be announcing, early next week, some extraordinary news that will also have a profound effect on our future. *I cannot tell you the news today, but I wanted you to know that something is coming . . .*

So, this is an important year for the College — a year of building and a year of planning — one in which we, like the first community in 1915, are very much *looking forward*, in every sense of that phrase. I would like to take a moment, then, to think about what lies before us: the opportunities and challenges we face as we begin this new year together.

All of them center, in one way or another, on the idea of **connections**. One of the most exciting projects of the current year is, of course, our new curriculum, which we are calling “Connections.” Last spring, Connecticut College made a major advance forward when the faculty ratified the requirements governing a whole new approach to liberal education. It was the culmination of a number of years of creative and collaborative effort on the part of students, faculty, and staff. Behind this new approach is a new, more integrative understanding of our own mission statement, *the liberal arts in action*.

Through “Connections,” you students are encouraged to explore deeper relationships between different modes of thought; between your mother tongue and a second language; between your chosen major and your elective courses of study; between your classwork and the work you do in the world; between your life on this hill and your experiences in New London

and beyond; between your liberal education here and your life after Conn. The greatest development of yourself as a whole person happens when you begin to grasp the deeper connections between those aspects of your life and your learning that would normally remain separate. And so at the centerpiece of the new curriculum is the integrative pathway, allowing you to explore your passions and ponder a question from several differing — even conflicting — vantage points. In the coming months our faculty will be building the courses and the pathways that will make this “Connections” curriculum come to life. This is a major undertaking and you students will play an important part of that development.

The second major project of the coming year is connected to this curriculum in many ways. In fact, you could say it flows directly from it. With a new vision for the future of liberal education at Conn, we have an obligation to think about the College’s future more broadly. And so this year we will be doing just that, engaging the whole community in a discussion of the priorities that will shape the College for the next five to ten years. If the new curriculum articulates our educational values, a new plan should define our common institutional goals. We will be forming a campus-wide strategic planning committee to help guide those conversations — and I will be telling you more about that soon — but the planning process, more importantly, will engage the whole community: staff, faculty, students, trustees, alumni, parents and friends of the College. In this respect, it is the most ambitious project we will undertake this year, one designed not only to draw a line from our past to our future, but also, through the planning process itself, to draw out *the deeper connections that define us as a community*.

This brings me to a final point, and to one more opportunity that lies before us in this new year. Later in this ceremony, we will recite the words of a pledge that constitutes our common observance of Connecticut College’s nearly 100-year-old honor code. It is one of my favorite parts of Convocation. You new students signed your matriculation pledge last night. Today everyone — — staff, faculty, and students of all classes — — will renew that pledge together. This is more than mere ritual; it is a collective affirmation of our values, and yet another way to think about “connections.”

Our code reminds us that we cannot separate the intellectual from the social, the academic work we wish to pursue from the lives we lead in pursuing it. It reminds us that all of our actions matter: the ways we talk to each other and listen to each other; the language we use in resolving conflicts; the efforts we make toward building openness and inclusion within our own circles and in the wider world. It reminds us that we have a collective duty to ensure the ability of all people to move freely and without intimidation in pursuit of their goals; that each member of this community has a voice. Our honor code, in short, reminds us that the core of the *liberal* arts is the liberating vision of a free and just society, a society founded on principles of personal integrity, mutual respect, and the embrace of difference.

Yesterday, at the panel on Claude Steele’s *Whistling Vivaldi*, a book about stereotype threat that served as our common reading this year, a new student asked an important question. He asked where the responsibility should lie for creating an environment in which all people will flourish? Is it the responsibility of the individual to create that space for him or herself, or is it the responsibility of the larger community to create it for everyone? Last year, our community here at Connecticut College engaged in a set of transformative conversations around this very

question. What emerged from the campus-wide dialogue was a greater sense of obligation to create new social pathways — — and stronger connections — — between the many different people who make up our vibrant campus, connections that will make it possible for all people to thrive.

This is serious work. It is hard work. It is ongoing work. And, in the context of the increasingly fractured and divided world we live in, it is urgent work. So, this is the thought I want to leave with you at this historic convocation. As we begin a new year, let it not be just another year. Let this year, the 101st year in our history, be one in which we embrace our obligation to take on the difficult and beautiful work of building new pathways that will build a stronger college. And in the process, let's not forget that the only way to do that work is *together*. *Thank you very much and welcome to a new academic year.*